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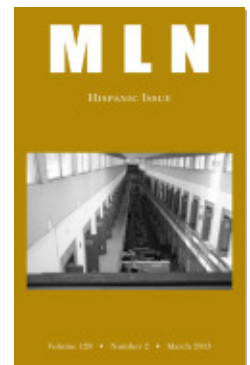
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## **Liminality and Fantasy in Marie Darrieussecq, Marie NDiaye and Marie Redonnet**

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# Liminality and Fantasy in Marie Darrieussecq, Marie NDiaye and Marie Redonnet



*Jean H. Duffy*

The question of the roles played in their fiction by fantasy and related generic borrowing has been a common strand running through the critical writing on Marie Darrieussecq, Marie NDiaye and Marie Redonnet.<sup>1</sup> Critics have been alert to the evidence of debt to various literary and popular traditions that, while not necessarily classifiable as fantasy, nevertheless incorporate fantastic elements; such traditions include the gothic, the picaresque and the chivalric narrative as well as folk culture, mythology, children's literature and various types of speculative fiction.<sup>2</sup> The work of Darrieussecq, NDiaye and Redonnet is also characterized by hybridity, the fusion of features from different genres, both fantastical and supposedly verisimilitudinous and including the following: the ghost story, science fiction, the fairy tale, the quest, allegory, romance, the detective story, the political thriller and

<sup>1</sup>I should like to thank the Arts and Humanities Research Council for funding research that permitted the writing of this article.

<sup>2</sup>Since the article does not seek to classify the works discussed within a generic taxonomy, but highlights rather the mixture of borrowing from various broadly "cognate" sub-genres, I shall not attempt here to add to the theoretical debate relating to definitions of fantasy and the fantastic or to summarise the various strands of that debate (notably, the contributions made by Tzvetan Todorov, Rosemary Jackson, Christine Brooke-Rose, Neil Cornwell, Kathryn Hume, Eric Rabkin and Lucie Armitt). However, Todorov's definition of the fantastic in terms of an unresolved hesitation between a natural or supernatural explanation of the events described is particularly relevant here, insofar as it suggests that the fantastic is to be considered as a liminal phenomenon.

autobiography.<sup>3</sup> In the work of all three, we find a host of archetypal characters from myth or fantasy. Amongst these one might cite as examples foundlings, hermits and crones in Redonnet's *Rose Mérie Rose*, variations on "wicked" sisters and wicked aunts in Redonnet's *Splendid Hotel*, NDiaye's *Autoportrait en vert* and *En famille*, the mermaid protagonist of NDiaye's *La Naufragée*, the ghosts of Darrieussecq's fiction and, in her *White*, a lively and waggish character called "Le Lutin" who seems momentarily to be able to escape through the computer screen to the other side of the world to join his wife and child in a sprightly or "spritely" jig (129).<sup>4</sup> In Darrieussecq's short story *Claire dans la forêt*,<sup>5</sup> the central character has two suitors—a healer and a woodcutter—each of whom would seem to have magical powers, while Redonnet's fiction incorporates numerous doubles and "sosies."<sup>6</sup> In *En famille*, the central character is at once the downtrodden heroine of fairy tale and folklore, a variation on the *picara* and a quest-heroine. In the same novel, Tante Léda, the object of the protagonist's quest, is—like her classical namesake—rumoured to have become the partner of a rich man (16); moreover, like the Leda of legend who gave birth to Helen of Troy, Fanny's aunt is also the—albeit unwitting—origin of strife. Many of the locations in which the narratives take place also belong to the repertoire of typical mythical and legendary settings or to settings with names that have certain magical or mythical connotations: the forests, grottos, and woodcutter's cabin of *Rose Mérie*

<sup>3</sup>Note, in particular, the following: Shirley Jordan, *Contemporary French Women's Writing: Women's Visions, Women's Voices, Women's Lives* (Amsterdam: Peter Lang, 2004); Cécile Narjoux, "Marie Darrieussecq et 'l'entre-deux-mondes' ou le fantastique à l'œuvre," *Iris: Les Cahiers du Gerf* 24 (2002–2003): 233–47; Christina Horvath, "Le Fantastique contemporain: un fantastique au féminin," *Iris: Les Cahiers du Gerf* 24 (2002–2003): 171–80; J. P. Little, "The Legacy of Medea, Mariama Bâ, *Un Chant écarlate* and Marie Ndiaye, *La Femme changée en bûche*," *Modern Language Review* 95: 2 (2000): 362–73; Elizabeth Fallaize, "Filling in the Blank Canvas: Memory, Inheritance, and Identity in Marie Redonnet's *Rose Mérie Rose*," *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 28: 4 (1992): 320–34; Yvette Went-Daoust "Ecrire le conte de fées: l'œuvre de Marie Redonnet," *Neophilologus*, 77: 3 (1993): 387–94; Katharine Gingrass-Conley, "Check-Out Time at the *Splendid Hôtel*: Marie Redonnet's New Mythological Space," *Neophilologus* 77: 1 (1993): 51–59; Ruth Cruickshank, "Marie Redonnet's *L'Accord de paix*: the question of Resistance and the Turn-of-the-Millennium Novel," *Modern and Contemporary France*, 12: 4 (2004): 497–511.

<sup>4</sup>*Rose Mérie Rose* (Paris: Minuit, 1987), *Splendid Hotel* (Paris: Minuit, 1986), *En famille* (Paris: Minuit, 1991), *Autoportrait en vert* (Paris: Mercure de France, 2005), *La Naufragée* (Charenton : Flohic, 1999), *White* (Paris: P.O.L., 2003).

<sup>5</sup>*Claire dans la forêt*, suivi de *Penthésilée, premier combat* (Paris: Des Femmes, 2004; first published in *Elle*, 2000).

<sup>6</sup>See, in particular, *Rose Mérie Rose, Doublures* (Paris: P.O.L, 1986) and *Silsie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990).

*Rose*; various underground locations (*La Sorcière* and *En famille*);<sup>7</sup> the labyrinthine spaces traversed by Mélie in *Rose Mélie Rose* and by Fanny in *En famille*; the pointedly named “Charms” quarter in which Mélie and her various mysterious hosts live in *Rose Mélie Rose*. Finally, these locations are the sites of various sorts of processes and actions that defy the laws of possibility. In *En famille* the central character is torn apart and partially eaten by a dog, dumped on a dung-heap, her remains finished off by hens (186–87), only to be revived in a later section of the novel, while the spirit of her dead grandmother manifests itself in various guises, including, comically, as a frustrated genie trapped in a bottle (288–89). In *Rose Mélie Rose*, the image recorded on the portrait that the elderly Mélie gives to the young Mélie starts to disappear as soon as she takes possession of it. Darrieussecq’s *Truismes*<sup>8</sup> is a tale of metamorphosis, while *La Sorcière* evokes a gamut of magic feats, ranging from the weak visionary powers of the failed sorceress protagonist who is able intermittently, and with great difficulty, to track the presence of other family members in other locations and to see “des ébauches d’avenir” (38), to the whimsical but startling transformations of her much more gifted apprentice daughters, to the grand “coup de théâtre” performed by her own mother, “une enchanteresse de grande volée” (76), when she turns her ex-husband into a snail.

Though not yet extensive, the criticism on these writers is rich in insights and tackles a wide range of topics, including, among others, the following: identity and origins; marginalisation, exclusion and exile; determinism and cultural legacy; formal and stylistic experimentation and reflexivity.<sup>9</sup> I do not intend in this article to take issue with the

<sup>7</sup> *La Sorcière* (Paris: Minuit, 1996).

<sup>8</sup> *Truismes* (Paris: P.O.L., 1996).

<sup>9</sup> Note, in particular, the following: Jordan, *Contemporary French Women’s Writing*; Colette Sarrey-Strack, *Fiction contemporaines au féminin: Marie Darrieussecq, Marie Ndiaye, Marie Nimier, Marie Redonnet* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2002); Shirley Jordan, “‘Un Grand Coup de pied dans le château de cubes’: Formal Experimentation in Marie Darrieussecq’s *Bref séjour chez les vivants*,” *Modern Language Review* 100: 1 (2005): 51–67; Lydie Moudileno, “Délits, détours et affabulation: l’écriture de l’anathème dans *En famille* de Marie Ndiaye,” *French Review* 71: 3 (1998): 442–53; Warren Motte, *Fables of the Novel: French Fiction since 1960* (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive, 2003) 115–133; Elizabeth Fallaize, “Filling in the Blank Canvas: Memory, Inheritance, and Identity in Marie Redonnet’s *Rose Mélie Rose*”; Anne-Marie Picard, “Dans le paysage, une figure . . . presque féminine: le triptyque de Marie Redonnet,” *Australian Journal of French Studies* 31: 2 (1994): 228–40; Jordan Stump, “At the Intersection of Self and Other: Marie Redonnet’s *Splendid Hotel*, *Forever Valley* and *Rose Mélie Rose*,” Michael Bishop, ed. *Thirty Voices in the Feminine* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996) 267–73; Jeanine S. Alesch, “*Material Girl*”: Becoming and Unbecoming in Marie Redonnet’s *Forever Valley*,” *French Forum* 29: 3 (2004) 57–77. Note also Simon Kemp’s analysis of the influence of developments in cognitive science on the repre-

very plausible and frequently highly sophisticated interpretations that have been offered, but rather, building on some of those readings, to try to suggest a complementary vein of enquiry which will draw on anthropological models and which will explore the very important relationship between fantasy and liminality in these texts. It is my contention here that the work of all three writers is characterised by recurrent references to various sorts of liminal zones, periods and experiences and that analysis of this pattern of allusion will not only shed further light on the use of the fantastic in these texts, but also help us to identify with more precision shared concerns and certain priorities that make their *œuvres* distinctive. In the interests of economy and balance, the article will focus on the following corpus: *Le Mal de mer*, *Le Pays*,<sup>10</sup> *Claire dans la forêt* and *White* by Marie Darrieussecq; *En famille*, *La Sorcière* and *Autoportrait en vert* by Marie NDiaye; *Splendid Hotel*, *Forever Valley*,<sup>11</sup> *Rose Mérie Rose* by Marie Redonnet. The principal methodological points of reference will be the work of Arnold Van Gennep and Victor Turner.

The concept of liminality was first introduced into anthropological discourse by Arnold Van Gennep in his seminal study of the structural principles underpinning the rites of passage that mark both the stages of the individual's journey through life (pregnancy and confinement, birth and childhood, adolescence and initiation, betrothal and marriage, death and disposal of the body (and passage to another realm or state) and various sorts of periodic changes, such as the ceremonies that mark seasonal transitions.<sup>12</sup> Van Gennep sees the transition ritual in terms of a three-stage sequence (separation, "période de marge" or "période liminaire" and reaggregation or reincorporation) and draws particular attention to the central, intermediate stage, to the various rites which mark opening and closure of that phase and to the importance of thresholds and portals. That Van Gennep's observations on ritual and liminality are now regarded as seminal is, in large part, thanks to the work of Victor Turner who further developed the notion of liminality and who, combining it with the notion of *communitas*,<sup>13</sup> identified it as a state permitting revitalisation, the transgression or

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sensation of self in Darrieussecq's fiction and on their formal structures (Simon Kemp, "Darrieussecq's Mind," *French Studies* 62: 4 [2008]: 429–41).

<sup>10</sup> *Le Mal de mer* (Paris: P.O.L., 1999), *Le Pays* (Paris: P.O.L., 2005).

<sup>11</sup> *Forever Valley* (Paris: Minuit, 1987).

<sup>12</sup> Arnold Van Gennep, *Rites de passage* (Paris: Nourry, 1909).

<sup>13</sup> Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (London: Penguin, 1969).

dissolution of confining norms, structural renewal and the revelation of potentiality: "Liminality may perhaps be regarded as the Nay to all positive structural assertions, but as in some sense the source of them all, and, more than that, as a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise."<sup>14</sup> The work of both Van Gennep and Turner will inform the readings that follow. The article will focus first on the various functions of thresholds, portals and signs in the work of Darrieussecq, NDiaye and Redonnet, while the second section will consider the thematic implications of the predilection shown in the selected novels for liminal spatial and temporal settings.

### Just Passing Through: Thresholds, Portals and Signs

For Darrieussecq, NDiaye and Redonnet, the *limen* is a powerfully symbolic and polyvalent locus. At once a point of entry and a point of exit, a marker of separation and of integration and an indice of beginnings and endings, it is a site that inspires excitement and trepidation, sorrow and celebration, unexpected hospitality and unjustified hostility; it is a site that heralds potential and establishes limits, that challenges characters to test their powers and to acknowledge their inadequacy. Many of the texts examined here involve liminal portals of various sorts; some are conventional gates and doorways; others are metaphorical openings and thresholds or high-tech points of access to other worlds and to new forms of knowledge.

In Marie NDiaye's *La Sorcière*, portals serve both to mark initiatory stages and to indicate the boundaries that confine the protagonist within a state of liminality, as neither true mortal nor true witch. Thus, one of the first indications that Lucie, the protagonist, has

<sup>14</sup> *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1967) 97. Turner identified three components of liminality: the first is the "communication of sacra," which involves the communication of secret symbols to the ritual subjects, as well as ritual actions such as dancing and instructions (the communication of mythical history). The second component consists of the "ludic deconstruction and recombination of familiar cultural configurations . . . the exaggeration or distortion of the characteristics of familiar articles in the sacra," i.e. processes which promote reflection on the values of the community. The third element involves the suspension of the socio-structural distinctions and is the foundation of Turner's concept of *communitas*, a state of social interrelatedness in which the usual hierarchies are suspended and which permits the "liberation of capacities of cognition, affect, volition, creativity, etc. from the normative constraints incumbent upon occupying a sequence of social statuses" (*From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* [New York: PAJ Publications, 1982] 44).

that her daughters' initiation into the secrets of sorcery is nearing completion takes the form of a transgression of liminal protocol: the apprentice witches magically exit and re-enter their grandfather's flat without using doors or stairs (101). By contrast, her own ambiguous, "betwixt and between" status as a "sorcière un peu ratée" (38) is movingly highlighted by a closed door in a scene that has strong Proustian connotations. Having awakened from a dream in which her mother had come to kiss her goodnight, the protagonist stares at the door, willing her in vain to appear, but it would seem that as an adult witch she has even weaker powers than those of the puny, fretful and mortal Marcel (126). Indeed, when, a few minutes later, she discovers her mother sitting waiting for her in the kitchen, it is clear that the latter—a highly talented witch—has come of her own volition and not in response to her daughter's summons. Moreover, she has come not to offer comfort, but to try to make her daughter see sense and, in doing so, to dampen Lucie's infantile and very *human* hope that she might engineer the reconciliation of her parents (128–29).

The association with doorways also applies to two other characters in *La Sorcière* who—it is hinted—may also be witches. Thus, Isabelle's ambiguous status as a lazy initiate is signalled by her regular violation of liminal codes (she never knocks before entering the protagonist's house) and by her disrespect for the territory and privacy of her friend: "Jamais elle ne frappait ni ne sonnait à la porte, et elle savait avancer sans bruits sur ses chaussures ailées" (72). Here the choice of adjective—"ailées" may be a figurative reference to Isabelle's speed, a reference to the logo on her shoes, or a literal reference to wings on her shoes—is a discreet indicator of the visitor's uncertain status as "apprentice witch" and an anticipatory allusion to the narrator's subsequent suspicions regarding Isabelle's transformation into a crow.<sup>15</sup> Sudden and not wholly explicable appearances and disappearances also mark the behavior of the mysterious stranger dressed in a long yellow garment whom the narrator encounters in the street and who, rather pointedly, greets her as "ma sœur." This character, whose presence in the text is confined to these few pages, disappears as quickly as she appears into a dilapidated house (i.e. into a building that is a variation on the witch's hovel of folklore and fairy-tale); here, significantly, the formulation is ambiguous and does not indicate whether

<sup>15</sup> Though she would seem to have learned little from the protagonist's initiation lessons, on several occasions later in the text, the latter does wonder whether the crow that seems to be following her is Isabelle.



she uses the door or passes through the wall ("Elle se glissa dans une maison," 62), and her reappearance at an upstairs window is very sudden. On this occasion, as after her dream, the protagonist waits in vain in front of a closed door, hoping for a repeated and this time more decisive mark of recognition that would signal her integration into a community of "sisters."

In *En famille*, the portal figures even more prominently and, once again, highlights the protagonist's problematic standing within her community. Fanny's status as a stigmatized individual is indicated from the outset of the novel and repeatedly in the body of the text by the many obstructed and closed portals and aggressive threshold guardians (often Cerberus-like dogs) encountered in the course of her picaresque quest to find the person whom she believes to be at the root of her stigmatization.<sup>16</sup> Having first found her entrance to the family home barred, having then been slighted in the celebrations to mark the *aïeule's* birthday, Fanny embarks on her immensely long trek through a labyrinthine space that initially seems vast, but that is revealed ultimately to be circumscribed within a few square miles and to include the grandmother's village and neighbouring rural settlements. The various hostile reactions that Fanny encounters in the course of her travels would suggest initially that she bears, at least to some degree, all three of the stigma types identified by Erving Goffman: that is, "abominations of the body," "blemishes of individual character" and "tribal stigma" that is transmitted through lineage (14).<sup>17</sup> Thus, not only does her appearance cause others to stare but, as her aunt informs her, her behavior is also partly responsible for the opprobrium which she provokes; moreover, her parents' conduct—in an act of negligence that is reminiscent of the opening of *Sleeping Beauty*,<sup>18</sup> her parents forget to invite Tante Léda to her christening party—was a transgression of the ritual code relating to hospitality and has inflicted upon their child a stigma that will blight her life.

However, gradually in the course of the narrative, as she lurches from one misadventure to the next one, one trial to the following,

<sup>16</sup>Referring to Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger*, Turner also notes that "liminal individuals are polluting, and thus dangerous, to those who have not gone through the liminal period" (*The Forest of Symbols* 98).

<sup>17</sup>*Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (London: Penguin, 1990; originally published by Prentice-Hall, 1963) 14. The theme of stigmatization is a recurrent theme in NDiaye. Compare *La Naufragée* and *Mon cœur à l'étroit* (Paris: Gallimard, 2007).

<sup>18</sup>See Moudileno, "Délits, détours et affabulation: l'écriture de l'anathème dans *En famille* de Marie Ndiaye," 445.

and as she loses the various talismans that she picks up along the way, the ostensible reasons for her stigmatization are thrown into doubt: her looks attract no attention in the *cité* hamburger restaurant where she finds a job (135–37, 139), and she is eventually able to live, more or less unnoticed, in the village where her family lives (139, 223); Georges and his family think that she can do no wrong (145–48); her father suddenly develops an inexplicable and inordinate pride in his daughter and wants to show her off to the local community (237–46); finally, it is suggested that Tante Léda either could not be aware of any slight, since she had disappeared long before Fanny's birth or that she is Fanny's real mother and had in some way been party to a hoax perpetuated by Fanny's official parents (257). Indeed, the behavior of both family and strangers is highly erratic: in one chapter, her enquiries are greeted with hostility, and dogs are either set upon her or lurk menacingly in the background;<sup>19</sup> in another, strangers offer her hospitality and gifts (51–64); opponents and helpers appear from nowhere to bar her way or to facilitate her quest before disappearing just as unexpectedly. At one point, the stigma even seems to transfer to another character. Thus, in the chapter entitled "En famille," having established a precarious household with Georges and, having opened her own door to take in the abandoned Tante Colette (218), Fanny finds that the stigma has been momentarily reassigned to Georges. Moreover, Fanny's own reaction at this point is telling: though she claims to love Georges all the more, she prides herself on the fact that she now bears little resemblance to him and she is evidently pleased to have shed—even if only briefly—something of the difference that alienated others.

Ultimately, it is only in chapter 11, in a narrative recounted by the *cousine* and which complements Tante Colette's tirade in chapter 4, that we find a coherent explanation of Fanny's stigmatization. Here, the *cousine* describes her last contact with Fanny; the latter has accepted her stigmatization and, precisely as stigma-bearer, she has found her station in the village community. As Fanny admits herself, "elle avait trouvé au village un rôle et une place qu'on ne lui déniait pas, qui convenaient fort bien à ce qu'elle était, dans lesquels même, en raison de son aspect, elle avait acquis une forme de succès" (299). The community needs her, because it defines itself through its deprecation of difference; the stigmatized individual who is willing to assume the role

<sup>19</sup>Dogs are a threatening presence throughout the text. See pages 7, 23, 77, 83, 88–89, 99, 161, 185.

of the Other will be the object of disrespect, of mimicry and of bawdy derision, but he or she will have a purpose, by his or her deviation affirming the normality of the other members of the community. But Fanny's story is not yet over; in one last loop back on itself, the novel finishes as it started: that is, on a threshold. Her desperate incestuous love for Eugène—a displaced symptom of her nostalgic yearning for reintegration into a family which had never included her—makes her consent to the unfulfillable condition that he sets. Renouncing her self-love in a last lingering contemplation of her reflection in a pond, relinquishing the narcissism that is necessary to the survival of identity, she agrees to “modifier son aspect,” knowing that the attempt to do so will kill her (300). When she reappears on his doorstep, she has indeed changed: into an unnameable long yellow shape lying like a stain on the doorstep (305). Between the gate that opened the text and the doorstep that closes it, Fanny's journey has brought her to her own variation on Scylla and Charybdis: forced to choose between equally unacceptable choices, either to accept her role as stigma-bearer for the community or to sacrifice her identity and her self-love in the hope that she will be integrated and accepted as an equal.

In Darrieussecq's 2003 novel *White* which, like its successor *Le Pays*, is temporally located in the near future, the computer screen acts as portal to the outside world, offering virtual contact with family, friends and “ordinary reality” to an international team of researchers, engineers and technicians working in a remote research station in Antarctica. Here, Edmée is the “gardien du seuil” who enables the passage of messages between her colleagues and their families; because of the international composition of the group and the need to be able to contact simultaneously Europe, North America and Australia, these communications have to take place in what might be regarded as a “liminal” time-slot, i.e. a time that coincides with the waking hours of all concerned, but which is convenient for no one: “Ça donnait un temps entre-deux, mi-figue mi-raisin” (132). It is significant that this portal to the outside world is a redundant or, at best, rather ineffective means of communication for both Edmée and Peter, the rather rootless young man who will ultimately become her lover. The traumas of their pasts have effectively cut them off from kin and partners. Peter never uses the portal; his checkered family history and the brutal death of his sister have isolated him both from his adoptive and natural parents and would seem to have damaged his ability to interact with anyone. Edmée, on the other hand, goes through the motions of communicating with the outside world, but

her exchanges with her husband are technically and emotionally unsatisfactory. As the communications specialist, Edmée is not only able to put herself at the head of the queue and call Sam first, but often squeezes in a second call at the end of the session. However, Sam's self-consciousness about talking to her from his office, the fact she almost always sees him dressed "*en chemise et cravate*" (132), his colleagues' jokes regarding his wife's "*lubie polaire*" and his wandering gaze (he is unable to see her) inhibit communication (124); moreover, by the time her colleagues have finished their sessions, the satellite signal is weak and the images and sound are starting to break up; Sam's voice slows down to the point of incomprehensibility, his body splits into two and dislocates into pieces, and he disappears from the screen (135). However, even when the signal is strong, what passes through the portal is small talk that is at best reassuring, but rather evasive and vapid, avoiding all reference to the trauma that befell the suburban community in which they lived—Imelda Higgins's slaughter of her children—and which sidesteps the question of "*l'enfant*." This question remains obscure to the reader, since we never learn whether the allusion relates to Higgins's surviving infant or to the unfulfilled desire of Edmée, of her husband or of both for a child of their own. Whatever the case, "communication" between them is governed by a protocol as rigid and inhibiting as the computer game that Sam so enjoyed and that allows for no hesitations or wrong moves: "*ce jeu où il faut dire la bonne phrase au bon moment et au bon personnage . . . sinon les personnages se mettent en boucle et font de drôles de têtes, et on est renvoyé au début du scénario*" (160).

By contrast, the "relationship" of Edmée and Peter is associated with another, much more primitive doorway: the entrance to Edmée's tent. If the text devotes as much space to a description of Peter first hovering indecisively outside the tent and then painstakingly undoing the Velcro and snapper fastenings, it is, in part, in order to highlight both the delicacy required to bring about this encounter and its raw physicality. By contrast with the communication between Edmée and Sam, which consists of pleasantries and takes place on a virtual plane, what occurs between Edmée and Peter is intensely physical (they exchange only a few words in the course of the text and "express themselves" in "*leur anglais de contrebande*," 204).<sup>20</sup> However, their reckless sexual encoun-

<sup>20</sup>That is, in a language that is foreign for both of them and that locates their interaction in a neutral zone. Note too that their lovemaking takes place at "*la mi-saison*" (125).

ter can only occur after Peter has methodically—and with some risk to himself—unfastened the tent flap, after he has undergone the ordeal of the “*scriitch . . . scriiitch*” made by the Velcro, the “*pît pît pît*” (176) made by the snap fastenings, the sensation of the  $-47^{\circ}$  temperature attacking his ungloved hand and the temporary impotence caused by anxiety, cold and an urgent need to urinate. The fact that they come together in such a flimsy shelter is also significant: this tent may be made of high-tech materials, but it is fundamentally only a sophisticated, updated version of the rudimentary shelters used by modern man’s distant nomadic ancestors. As Peter and Edmée’s lovemaking reaches its climax, the ghostly narrators who credit themselves with engineering this convergence and who appear to be playing with their fates truncate their names and refer to them simply by their initials, an amusing shorthand that reflects perhaps the final rush of orgasm, but also an indication that in this moment Edmée and Peter have, through sexual passion, reached an elemental state of physicality in which they have briefly shed their personal baggage in this remote icescape (194, 196). As they come together in a primal sexual act, they overcome the impediments placed in their way by the ghosts born of their past trauma and by the spectral presences of doomed explorers and star-crossed lovers from history and literature. The door that they close on them may be a flimsy and temporary barrier, but secures them an intimate space in an environment that is at once crowded and empty: “C’est à distance, dehors, sur la neige, que les ombres se déploient. . . . Tristan et Yseult, Héloïse et Abelard, les Amants Crucifiés, Roméo, Juliette, le Prince et la Princesse, grimacent sur les planches. D’être à ce point laissés pour compte . . . d’être tenus pour si peu, les fantômes se massent, s’agglutinent, font corps avec l’abri de toile . . .” (197). This primal act has far-reaching consequences: Peter neglects his duties and does not respond quickly enough to the heating plant emergency; the plant blows up; the expedition and the attempt to bore through the ice to reach the “*lac des profondeurs*,” the “*eau des origines*” (133) are abandoned. However, if the quest to reach the original source of life fails, it is in order that new life can be generated: attention to the past—Edmée’s and Peter’s, that of humanity—is temporarily suspended to make way for the future, the life of the child that is conceived in this act of intercourse.

In Redonnet, the sign that marks the threshold is rather more important than the threshold itself and serves to highlight the importance of linguistic initiation. At the beginning of *Rose Mélie Rose*, Rose’s breaking of the souvenirs in her souvenir shop and Mélie’s removal of the shop

sign marks the end of an era and the start of Mélie's introduction to the problematic relationship between language, representation and reality. By smashing the souvenirs (and indeed, by instructing Mélie to throw the debris to the bottom of the falls so that they will no longer be identifiable fragments of objects, but will be reduced to smithereens), Rose is acknowledging a dislocation between language and referent and signaling to Mélie that she must master a new set of signs, must make her way in the outside world and learn to read its codes. Faithful to her archetypal models in myth and fairy tale, the hermit Rose demonstrates her wisdom not only by reading the omens that prefigure the onset of Mélie's first period (12), but also by recognizing that the traditional culture that she has transmitted as her legacy to the foundling Mélie is but the groundwork for her future development and that, in order to become a self-sufficient human being, Mélie has to embark on her own adventures, to create her own legends. By virtue of its ambiguous status, the shop sign that Mélie takes with her signals her liminal status as an initiate, for it is at once a referential object and a symbol: from being a linguistic marker identifying Rose's souvenir shop, it becomes the shop's last souvenir. At the same time, it is an emblem of Mélie's provenance and a talisman that opens the door to the future, that allows her to cross another threshold and to find shelter in the house of Nem. Mélie's journey takes her to a place—the capital of the island—whose name, like that of Beckett's Watt, is a pun on the interrogative pronoun "what" and which, linguistically and in other respects, finds itself in a state of "betwixt and between."<sup>21</sup> Here language is in crisis: the old alphabet that Mélie learned from Rose has given way to a new alphabet which is, however, different from the new alphabet of the continent. Mélie's first contact in Oat is with Nem (another Beckett-like play perhaps on the word "name" or "nemesis") who has spent so much of his life translating into the old alphabet books that he found at the back of the storage area of the library and that are written in an even older alphabet, only to discover, after he has finished, that he has used the wrong linguistic model (27–28). The negotiation of the city is problematic because threshold signs are unreliable: the souvenir shop sign above Nem's door is deceptive (the interior is just a largely empty, dusty and mildewed house, 25–26); the elderly Mélie who offers hospitality to the young Mélie informs her that "la rue des

<sup>21</sup> On Redonnet and Beckett, see Fallaize, "Filling in the Blank Canvas: Memory, Inheritance, and Identity in Marie Redonnet's *Rose Mélie Rose*," 321, 323.

Charmes" is in fact "le passage des Charmes," that the street signs fell down and the city workers confused them when they put them back up (44). Old age, deafness and memory loss interpose further barriers between language and meaning and between language and knowledge: the crackling in Nem's hearing aid makes him hear other words than those which are spoken, and his replies do not match the questions (28); Mélie's poor memory and her loss of basic linguistic and temporal coordinates effectively silence her (43).

By contrast with the inhabitants and despite the obstacles, Mélie manages not only to negotiate this labyrinthine space but, alone among the characters, masters both the old and the new alphabets. By refusing to sell her talismanic sign to the second-hand dealer (66, 95), she is refusing to allow the old culture to be relegated to the status of archaic curiosity, but her assiduity (her name means "industriousness") and her rapid acquisition of the new alphabet (56) allow her to find a role or rather two roles in this unstable and threatened world; moreover, the roles that she finds—record-keeper and copy-secretary responsible for correspondence with the new administration on the mainland (76, 94)—give her a Janus-like status as the registrar of the past and the channel of communication with the future. However, at the same time, she is attending to her own present, to the recording of her own unique experiences by means of the photographs taken by her Polaroid camera, the "instant camera" recording representative moments of her new life and allowing her to annotate them, to inscribe her own "légendes" almost as soon as they are taken. It is only after she has used up all her exposures—that is, has completed the twelve stages of her initiation—that she can return to the Hermitage, to give birth and to restore the sign to its original place above the door (131). In the course of her journey, Mélie has reconnected language and reality, albeit in a highly personal way. By recording her own personal experiences both photographically and in apparently artless *légendes* written in a language that is direct, simple and yet hyper-precise, she has created a set of souvenirs and a legacy for her own daughter. In replacing the sign above the door and in voicing her hope that a new souvenir shop will be opened by the travelers spotted as she heads away from the hermitage towards her death (135), Mélie is returning the sign to a wider community and passing over responsibility to others to ensure that the reconnection that she has made between words and experience is maintained.

### Neither Here nor There, Between the No Longer and the Not Yet

A high proportion of the narratives considered here also take place in liminal zones—e.g. territories close to geographical or political borders, points at which land and water meet—and also, in some instances, at liminal points in time. *Le Mal de mer* is set, as so often is the case in Darrieussecq's fiction, on the French-Spanish border in a seaside resort to which a young woman has absconded with her daughter, giving no warning or explanation to her husband or mother. Here converge not only the three protagonists—mother, daughter, grandmother—but also a range of other characters who are associated with transient lifestyles: a private detective who has come in search of the woman and child, the manager of the local short-term rental agency, a swimming instructor working the season in the resort, an ice-cream vendor. The novel opens at twilight, as the mother and daughter first reach the dunes close to the resort. The liminal nature of the moment and the ambivalence of the child's feelings—trepidation and fascination—are suggested by the animistic description of the scene. As she approaches the sea through the dunes, it assumes an almost fantastical aspect: first taking on the appearance of a huge disembodied mouth (that is, a liminal form) and then, as she reaches the top of the dune, that of a pair of immense outstretched arms that draw her magnetically towards the liquid mass (9). The novel closes in another liminal space, in a typical modern “non-lieu,” a city airport during the two-hour interval between the mother's internal flight and her international flight (124), as she hovers between her old life (she thinks of her child asleep in her old apartment in the city) and the unknown new life on the other side of the world, assuming through the use of English a kind of intermediate, unspecified identity: “Quand elle n'a pas à montrer son passeport, on la prend pour une étrangère; ni anglaise à cause de l'accent, ni d'ici, forcément” (135). Between this arrival and departure, welcome and leave-taking, the lives of three generations of the one family have been radically changed. By the end of the novel, the grandmother would seem to have passed from life to death, her gradual decline mimicked by the crumbling of the sea-cliff which she can see from her window;<sup>22</sup> her daughter, the young mother, has abandoned home, husband and, ultimately, her child; the child has encountered the sea for the first time and has learned to swim. Though they spend most of the book in the same resort,

<sup>22</sup>That is, by a phenomenon that erodes boundaries and distinctions.



the mother and grandmother do not meet again, but both have succeeded in passing on a legacy to the child: the grandmother through the knowledge of natural history and of the origins of life that she has transmitted to the child, the less cerebral and more sensual mother by ensuring that the child is physically initiated to the sea and that she learns to survive and, indeed, thrive in the element from which all life originally sprang. If, in this novel, fantasy is contained within the subjective psychological realms of the characters, their thoughts, dreams and imaginative flights highlight the central importance of the sea as a physical, psychological and symbolic coordinate. Thus, as the ailing grandmother drifts into sleep as she lies in her bath, she seems momentarily to undergo metamorphosis, the various parts of her body gliding off to become maritime species, while the basking shark that is washed up on the beach induces a moment of *rêverie* in the detective making him reflect on the roles that the sea and the creatures that live in it played in the generation of many of the myths and legends by which we have conferred meaning on our world:

Elle s'endort dans le bain, les algues se défont dans l'eau de mer chauffée, cuisent, épaississent, elle ne sent plus ses jambes sous les longs fils gluants; ses mains sont des coraux, ses bras des anguilles mortes, et ses seins des poissons-lune, qui flottent, lâches, sous le filet errant de sa peau. (103)

Presque aveugle . . . son aspect déroutant, alangui et monstrueux, est à l'origine de nombreuses légendes (sirènes, dragons des mers, sous-marins gigantesques). (117–18)

The Landes forest where the protagonist lives in *Claire dans la forêt* is also a liminal zone not only because of its location, but also because of its physical composition. It was once a marsh and, though the land was drained and planted in the nineteenth century, the narrator is ever aware of the enduring presence of the water (26–27). In this brief *récit*, the encounter between the narrator and her future husband takes place at the summer solstice; thereafter, as she makes her preparations for her wedding to her childhood sweetheart, she finds herself caught between two different sorts of ‘magicians,’ men who are invested with different sorts of supernatural power: the Christian healer who is an integrated and familiar element of community life and the unfamiliar and more threatening woodcutter who seems to put a spell on her. Moreover, whereas the healer, the pointedly named “Pierre,” is associated with solid ground (as a “porteur” he interposes his own body between that of his patients and the earth), the woodcutter is associated with the meeting of the elements, with

the water and earth of the reclaimed forest, with fire and air in the various combustive incidents that take place in the text: it is he—it is suggested—who, by an act of magic, places a burning cinder in the protagonist's pocket and who causes her wedding dress spontaneously to burn on the eve of the wedding (53–54). Although no clear rational explanation for her choice is articulated, the references to her sterility, to the attitudes of her community to it and the implied association between that sterility and her family's atheism suggest that she is the victim of a form of stigmatization which, though discreet and compassionate, nevertheless devalues her. In succumbing to the spell of the woodcutter, she is turning her back on the certainty, solidity and clarity represented by Pierre and his community (their rock-hard belief in God, the certainty and incurability of her sterility) and on the compromises that they demand of her (her submission to Pierre's gentle, meticulous, somewhat clinical sexual initiation, the pre-wedding confession that he arranges for her with the local priest); she is turning towards a more fluid, uncertain world, the proximity of which seems to make the townspeople feel "mal dans leur peau" (hence, Pierre's thriving business) and in which the impossible becomes—at some level at least—possible,<sup>23</sup> a world that does not require compromises (she admits that the relationship is fiery). In short, in following the woodcutter, she follows her own instinct, rather than received knowledge and, renouncing the even "lumière amortie" of Pierre's world (53) and its "idées claires" (12) she embraces both her identity as "Claire dans la forêt" and the realm of the imaginary.

*Le Pays* is also set in South West France, this time in the Basque country, but in a near future in which the region has become a newly constituted border nation, called "le Pays Yuoangui," a name which itself draws attention to the new country's liminal nature: "Pays Yuoangui, pays sans nom, le pays avec adjectif comme il y a un pays dogon et un pays masai. A la lettre P ou la lettre Y, dans l'hésitation de ce qui prime, le nom ou l'adjectif, le générique ou le particulier" (108). The "Pays Yuoangui" is a nation that is in a state of transition, that is still in the process of constructing its identity, at once drawing on and attempting to reinvigorate the vestiges of ancient traditions and earnestly promoting new cultural and creative endeavors. It is a country that is relearning about the past and trying to build for the future. Similarly, the protagonist finds herself on the threshold of a new

<sup>23</sup>At the end of the text she claims to be expecting a child even though the scan suggests otherwise.

phase of her life. Returning to her birthplace—"le pays"—in search of origins and identity, she too has to relearn the culture, including the language, that she has lost.<sup>24</sup> She is also a liminal figure for other reasons: although she does not realize that she is pregnant when she takes the decision to return to her roots, she is instinctively drawn back to this border region because, with the start of pregnancy, she is entering a liminal phase. Psychologically, she is also liminal insofar as she is caught between the future of her family in this new/old country and a traumatic family history (the death of a baby brother which would seem, in part at least, to be an indirect factor in the onset of mental illness in her adoptive brother and in the divorce of her parents).

Before she can properly establish her new life she has ghosts to lay and her struggle to do so is reflected pointedly and poignantly in her efforts to learn the old language. Thus, she strives largely unsuccessfully with language tapes, the trite drills of which ironically recall the family life that was lost in this old country when her infant brother died ("*Bonjour, nous habitons une jolie maison et nous avons trois enfants,*" 217). Equally significantly, it is when she is in labor that she starts to understand the old language (292). For this development to have taken place, she has had to deal with her dead. Drawn back magnetically and repeatedly to the "Maison des Morts," her "interaction" with the holograms of the dead effects a kind of therapy. Here as in *White*, technology provides a portal to another zone: updating ancient Yuoangui commemorative ritual, whereby the corpses of the dead were dug up a year after burial, their bones scraped and transformed into "statuettes mortuaires" (81–84), the computers in the Maison des Morts offer access to the dead or at least to "virtual" versions of them.<sup>25</sup> That this commemorative facility is in appallingly bad taste is never in doubt. The limitations of the technology also become evident very quickly and the illusion of access is punctured as soon as the computer operator strays beyond the boundaries set by pre-programming. Thus, the grandmother's hologram is unable to respond to the news of the protagonist's pregnancy (201–02). The psychological risks are also apparent: the temptation of morbid wish-fulfillment is attested in the "programme de vieillissement" (213) to which some families have subjected their youthful dead and in the imagined lives that they have generated for them. For a moment, the protagonist gives

<sup>24</sup> Compare Peter Tomson in *White* who has also lost his native tongue (112).

<sup>25</sup> Compare *White*, 20–21.

in to this temptation, starting to build a fantasy hologram of her dead infant brother; it is only when she realizes that the hologram she is creating will become that of her own son that she manages to break the attraction (216). However, despite its questionable aspects, her excursions into the virtual world of the dead are therapeutic in that they make her realize that she cannot communicate with the dead and that she cannot control or, at times, even read the emotional reactions of the living. That her announcement of her pregnancy to the grandmother's hologram fails to provoke a "conventional" reaction is in a sense the logical extension of the promise to have children she made to her dying grandmother: the latter was unconscious, but the protagonist had assumed that this would have been her wish (182); in short, she had unconsciously projected on to her grandmother her own wishes and, with them, a degree of responsibility for her life. Similarly her abortive attempt to complete the blank hologram of her baby brother forces her to accept that she can do nothing to bridge the gulf opened up between her parents by the baby's death and, indeed, that their suffering, like hers, lies beyond the power of another's imagination:

Mais rien, absolument rien. Ni photo, ni récit, ni souvenir. C'avait été leur façon à eux de faire, personne ne pouvait juger. Ma mère et mon père, quant aux morts, sont chacun à leur façon irréconciliables. . . . J'étais orpheline d'un frère, eux d'un fils. Je ne pouvais pas davantage participer à leur histoire qu'eux à la mienne. (207, 214)

Finally, her virtual "visits" to the sites of other people's dead and her vicarious participation in the commemorative rituals of strangers help her to integrate into this culture to which she belongs by birth, but which is so unfamiliar to her; these views give her some human coordinates in a community whose language she does not understand and among whose members she knows only her son's schoolteacher and the local shopkeepers (250–53).

If, as we have seen, liminality is associated with procreation, in Darrieussecq it is also associated with artistic creation. The writing of the protagonist's book mirrors the development of the embryo—a parallelism that in itself highlights the liminal dimension of the writing process. Moreover, not only is the book initiated in a space that is doubly liminal (in a border country in the *Maison des Morts*), it is also executed in a quasi-trance-like state in which the protagonist is, as it were, suspended between presence and absence, between her life as wife and mother in "le pays" and absorption in the creation of *Le Pays*:

J'écrivis la première scène dans la Maison des Morts, je l'écrivis immédiatement après les pages d'intro. C'était un horizon. . . . Tout était distant et surréel, j'étais dans *Le Pays* et pas dans le pays. L'espace entre les deux était un territoire, un pays de possibles. . . . Tiot et mon mari étaient descendus, j'écrivais dans leurs miettes et le parfum du chocolat, j'étais dans *Le Pays* et celle qui habitait le pays s'occupait d'embrasser et de bavarder pendant que ma main embarquée finissait sa phrase. (225)

The protagonist's quest to return to her origins and to lay the ghosts of the past have led her to an acknowledgement and an acceptance of her divided identity, an identity split, caught in the interstice between two cultures, between the past and the present, between the dead and the unborn, and between the conscious functioning "everyday self" and the writer who is, it would seem, governed by forces that are beyond conscious control: "Il aurait fallu écrire j/e. Un sujet ni brisé ni schizoïde, mais fendu, décollé. Comme les éléments séparés d'un module, qui continuent à tourner sur orbite. J/e courais, devenue bulle de pensée. La route était libre, j/e courait. J/e devenait la route, les arbres, le pays" (211). Finally, the link between liminality and artistic creation is highlighted in the text by the reflexive references to various forms of visual art: Turner's fluid landscapes which blur the distinction between the solid and the liquid (285)<sup>26</sup> and which seem to suspend time; the sculptures by the protagonist's mother (285) which question the distinction between inside and outside;<sup>27</sup> Bill Viola's *Nantes Triptych* (294)<sup>28</sup> which projects on to its three panels the final stages of labor and the birth of a child, a film of Viola's mother as she lies on her deathbed, and—on the central panel—a film, shot underwater, of a

<sup>26</sup> Compare *La Naufragée*, NDiaye's contribution to Flohic's "Collection Musées Secrets." Here, Turner's work and, in particular, his seascapes, serve as the point of departure for a narrative in which the protagonist/narrator is a mermaid (i.e. a creature which, by its hybridity, is essentially liminal) who is at first persecuted because of her hybrid nature and then appropriated by a painter who uses her as the source of his inspiration. The recurrence within the accompanying images of complete or partial reproductions of the *Slavership* (1840, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston) and *Sunrise in Mist (Fishermen cleaning and selling fish)* (1907, National Gallery, London) suggest that, on one level at least, the mermaid's story is to be read as an allusion to the atrocities (enslavement, exploitation, persecution, "ethnic cleansing") inflicted by the white man on those whom he considers to be racially "Other."

<sup>27</sup> "C'est sciemment qu'elle voulait des traces, qu'elle rayait le bronze, utilisait un trop gros grain. . . . Il ne restait quasiment plus de nez. Le visage, si c'était un visage, était celui d'un grand brûlé, sans lèvres, sans sourcils, effacé, abîmé de toutes parts. Et pourtant quelqu'un était là. Ma mère avait réussi à attraper une présence organique et mentale. Un intérieur humain, dans ce bronze debout qui marchait seul dans l'atelier" (284–85).

<sup>28</sup> Tate, 1992.

spectral figure repeatedly plunging downwards through the water, whose slow, dream-like movements around the screen connect the other two panels and suggest the journey from birth to death. The allusion to Viola's triptych, although brief, occurs in a relatively emphatic position in the text—i.e. very close to the end—and acts as a kind of implicit summation of the text's principal themes: birth and death, the natural and the supernatural, water, passage and the search for origin, the permeability of the distinctions between the solid and the liquid, the material and the immaterial.<sup>29</sup>

The three narratives of Redonnet's trilogy take place in liminal zones and in phases of transition from one era to another: *Splendid Hotel* is situated on the edge of a marsh and above an underground lake; *Forever Valley* is close to a political border, and the protagonist has been employed at the brothel to serve the needs of the local customs officers; the protagonist's search for a community cemetery takes place at a geological crossroads, and her digging simply uncovers a vein of sludge that crosses a ridge of stone; *Rose Mélie Rose* begins and closes at a stream's edge, though most of the narrative takes place in the island's seaport Oat which has the sea on one side and a lagoon on the other, and whose name, in addition to its proximity to "Watt" and "What," is phonetically close to the first syllable of "water"; here, as in *Forever Valley*, the customs house figures prominently as a place of employment, in this instance both of Miss Martha and, eventually, of Mélie.<sup>30</sup> In all three texts, the events evoked occur at the cusp of two eras: following its slow decline, the *Splendid Hotel* hovers on the point of disintegration, as the marshland reclaims more and more territory; scarcely has the protagonist of *Forever Valley* completed her excavation of the church garden when the Valley is forced to give up its claim to eternity, and it disappears beneath the water of the new reservoir; in *Rose Mélie Rose*, Oat is threatened by the encroaching lagoon, by regular flooding from heavy rainfall and by the edicts from and emigration to the mainland.

As Redonnet acknowledges in the highly illuminating essay which

<sup>29</sup> See, too, the reflexive commentary, on pages 249–50, on delayed gestation in marsupials, which also highlights the tension developed within the text between being and nothingness.

<sup>30</sup> See also Elizabeth Fallaize, *French Women's Writing: Recent Fiction* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993) 126–61; Jordan Stump, "Separation and Permeability in Marie Redonnet's Triptych," *French Forum* 20: 1 (1995): 105–19; Michèle Chossat, *Ernaux, Redonnet, Bâ et Ben Jelloun: le personnage féminin à l'aube du XXIème siècle* (New York: Lang, 2002) 92.

accompanies Jordan Stump's translation of *Rose Mèlie Rose*,<sup>31</sup> the trilogy also traces an aesthetic journey. In that essay, she locates the trilogy at the threshold of a new era in literature and she defines her task in the following terms: "Like the New Novelists, I seek to begin something new, but my attempt, unlike theirs, takes place at the intersection of two histories, that of poetry and that of the novel."<sup>32</sup> The trilogy can be read as an allegorical account of her creative efforts, the projects of each of her narrators serving to suggest different aspects and stages of her struggle to make it across that threshold. Thus, as Redonnet acknowledges, the Splendid Hotel, although doomed, can, like its namesake in Rimbaud's "Après le déluge," be read as a metaphor for the truly pioneering literary creation: "To build a new literature on still-virgin soil, Rimbaud's 'chaos of ice and polar night,' already explored by the brilliant surveyor Kafka, armed with his ax 'to break the frozen sea inside oneself.' Literature again conceived as the work of a pioneer, like the grandmother in *Hôtel Splendid*, who in her folly dared to build her hotel at the edge of the swamp where nothing had ever been built before."<sup>33</sup> If the efforts of the protagonist of *Splendid Hotel* are condemned to failure, the battle that she conducts to preserve what had been an audacious creation by her grandmother is heroic; if her ever-renewed purification rituals fail to keep at bay the forces of pollution and decay, the truncated neon signs that still illuminate the listing edifice at the end of the novel stand as a final comment on her courageous endeavor. Moreover, for a brief interlude—the freezing of the marsh has temporarily halted the downward progress of the foundering hotel—word and meaning match perfectly, the illuminated word "Splendid" resplendent and lighting up the nocturnal landscape for miles around (126). In *Forever Valley*, it is significant that, when the narrator begins her excavation project, the father puts aside the book that hitherto he has been reading over and over (52) and that, as the project proceeds, he seems progressively to petrify, to become a quasi-monument to the past. Moreover, in the process of creating her new cemetery, as she prepares the future past of Forever Valley, the narrator effectively dismantles the building that represented the authority and cultural values of the past, i.e. the church. However,

<sup>31</sup> "The Story of the Triptych" in Marie Redonnet, *Rose Mellie Rose*, trans. Jordan Stump (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1995) 111–20.

<sup>32</sup> "The Story of the Triptych" 112.

<sup>33</sup> "The Story of the Triptych" 112. See Fallaize on the thematic importance of the Rimbaud epigraph (*French Women's Writing: Recent Fiction* 132–36).

among the characters of the trilogy, only Mélie manages to straddle the old and the new, learning, as we have seen, both the old and then the new languages and creating a highly original work of her own which brings together the legacy she inherited from the past (the “livre de légendes”) and the annotated Polaroid photographs which record her own unique experience.<sup>34</sup> Mélie’s relationship with Yem, though a crucial stage in her evolution, could have no future, and the building of her house never gets beyond the stage of the excavation of the foundations, because Yem, for all that his boat’s name is written in the new alphabet, belongs fundamentally to the old culture: his dream—to follow to the end the channel that he claims to have found on the Northern coast—is an escapist fantasy fit for the “livre de légendes.” However, if the foundations of her house are never built, the private property sign which she has had erected in front of the abandoned building site, to which she has added her name and Yem’s and which gives Mélie such pleasure refers to rather more than the gaping hole in the ground (104): it draws attention to the fact that in the course of this narrative Mélie has become her own person, has developed her own distinctive *propriétés* and has found a personal idiom that allows her to express her own distinctiveness, as well as the equally distinctive otherness of those who have figured in her life:

The mirroring . . . represents confusion, loss and death. The narrators, through the power of their “I,” of their radically singular voice, fight against the proliferation of the double; they try to find a name, an identity, by creating a work of their own. To the mirrors and the faded portraits in the old houses of Oât, Mellie opposes her Polaroid that photographs the people around her in all their otherness, which she symbolizes with the legends she writes on the backs of the photos.<sup>35</sup>

It is an idiom that, though naively descriptive, is—like that of Redonnet—stripped back to its essentials, a minimalist idiom which constitutes a farewell to the poetry of the past and a possible foundation for future creation.

The narrative of NDiaye’s *Autoportrait en vert* opens on the banks of the Garonne, during the floods which hit the South of France in December 2003. The various references to the flood threats that punctuate the narrative make us constantly aware of the fact that this world is in a kind of state of suspension, poised waiting for a disaster

<sup>34</sup> See pages 47, 56, 62, 65, 75, 87, 88, 99, 108, 111, 112, 113, 10, 133.

<sup>35</sup> Jordan Stump and Marie Redonnet, “Interview” in *Forever Valley*, trans. Jordan Stump (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995): 103–13, 110.



which may or may not befall it. It is a setting that echoes the feeling of impending doom that, on the psychological level, informs NDiaye's strange, indirect "autobiography." The textual part of this slim volume consists of a series of brief evocations of periods and incidents involving various "femmes en vert" who have figured in the narrator's life; some of these women would seem to be ghosts; others are estranged members of the narrator's family; one is a passing acquaintance, perhaps even a stranger; all are associated with unhappiness or with a sense of disquiet and apprehension, the source of which remains unspecified. In short, the focus is centered not on the narrators, but rather on the emotional dynamics of the space between her and these mysterious women. Alongside and within the text, NDiaye has incorporated two sets of photographs. One set consists of complete images and details from the photographs of Julie Ganzin, showing, for the most part, out-of-focus female figures viewed against a landscape and, in two instances, landscapes without figures. The other set is composed of images by unknown early amateur photographers, showing individual and paired female figures, women and children, and two views of the same landscape. The photographs are never mentioned in the text, but the dynamic relationship between them is central to the creation of this oblique self-portrait.

In particular, the images throw into relief in various ways the themes of identity and liminality. Here, as elsewhere in NDiaye, identity is a fluid, unstable and elusive phenomenon that is derived in part from, but always ready to be eclipsed by, background, whether that background takes the form of kin and community or the physical environment which one inhabits. Thus, Ganzin's ghost-like, blurred and anonymous figures are the visual equivalents of the mysterious "femmes en vert" that appear every so often in the narrator's world. Moreover, caught with their back to the camera or as they move out of the frame, radically truncated or viewed from angles that obscure their faces, they serve as *mises en abyme* drawing attention to the mobility of the concept of identity, to its resistance to circumscription and, indeed, to its inextricable relationship with the liminal: just as Ganzin's figures are fluid shapes that are caught "betwixt and between" form and amorphousness, so NDiaye's characters are shape-shifting or malleable creatures caught in the ever-mobile network of relationships that link and separate them from their human and physical environment.

The second set of images is composed of the sorts of photographs that are passed down the generations, the heterogeneous images of long-dead ancestors and strangers who look out hauntingly from black

and white worlds, the definition of which, as here, is often compromised by the technical defects of the photographs or the effects of age (fading, stains, crazed surfaces, etc); these are the photographs which, as one reviewer has suggested “on range en vrac dans des boîtes à chaussures, des cartons à chapeaux,”<sup>36</sup> which are often dispersed as families scatter and which, if they survive, end up as the property of private collectors who have no link with the people represented. In *Autoportrait en vert*, these undated vintage photographs intersect with the text on several levels. On the most basic level of the relationship between visual and narrative motif, the images mirror the text. Thus, the standing figure in a garden in front of an open window and the double image of the woman sitting in front of an open French window leaning on a balcony (13, 49) provide a kind of indirect illustration of the story about the ghostly Katia Depetiteville, who threw herself from the balcony of her house to land apparently unscathed in front of the narrator. The images of two young women dressed as angels (76) might be read as an ironic commentary on the narrator’s encounter with her two almost identically dressed and coiffed, “reformed” sisters (previously rumored to be a drug addict and an alcoholic). The various images of mothers and daughters (63, 71, 92) highlight the centrality of the maternal motif, these apparently straightforward images of family unity belied by the complexity of maternity as it is presented in *Autoportrait*, where the already problematic relationships between the narrator’s mother and her three adult daughters is rendered even more difficult by her very late and irresponsible pregnancy and the eventual fostering of her infant daughter. Secondly, the unidentified anonymous figures who appear in these early photographs remind us of the ultimate unknowability of those who have gone before us; as the problematic family relationships of both *Autoportrait* and *En famille* show, for NDiaye, this principle applies just as readily to the most immediate kin of the previous generation. Thirdly, within this set of vintage photographs, there are two particularly interesting subsets: a sequence of three photographs of a mother and child showing them caught in slightly different poses (63, 71), and several pairs of slightly different images of the same motif which would seem to have been designed for stereoscopic viewing (8, 28, 49, 76, 92). If the first set, by the changes in pose and gesture, suggests the ever-shifting relationship between mother and child, the second set highlights rather the motif of liminality, for it is the differences between these images

<sup>36</sup>Jean-Baptiste Harang, “Ndiaye voit vert,” *Libération*, 13 janvier 2005.

that, in the stereoscopic process, produce the impression of three dimensionality: the illusionism is a product of the filmic interval or *interstice* between exposures.

Perhaps most interesting of all these juxtapositions are the correspondences which NDiaye establishes between one pair of stereoscopic images and the details from Ganzin's *Eco e Narciso*. Included among the former images are two side-by-side photographs of a woman sitting writing at a desk, or rather caught in a thoughtful pose, apparently reflecting on what she should write (28). The details from *Eco e Narciso* show two images of the same location: the one is a straightforward image of a wooded landscape; in the other, a figure has been included in one corner and the photograph has been turned 180 degrees to produce the image of what would appear to be a Narcissus-like figure kneeling beside and looking into a pool of water (25, 37). These pendant, paired images are clearly to be read as *mises en abyme* highlighting certain aspects of the writing process. The interstice between the images of the woman at her desk suggests that writing is an activity of the "betwixt and between," that it can only occur in liminal space, while the deception perpetrated between the two Ganzin photographs—the reversed Narcissus image precedes the "upright" image of the empty landscape—makes the reader/viewer question his or her own eyes. Considered as a group, together they provide a visual complement to the narrator's own highly instructive commentary on the status of the "femmes en vert":

Car je pense à ma mère, à la femme d'Ivan, à ma belle-mère, et je redoute de me considérer moi-même comme un être insensé si toutes ces femmes en vert disparaissent l'une après l'autre, me laissant dans l'impossibilité de prouver leur existence, ma propre originalité. Je me demande alors, dans la cuisine propre de mes sœurs, comment trouver supportable une vie dénuée de femmes en vert découpant en arrière-plan leur silhouette équivoque. Il me faut, pour traverser calmement ces moments d'hébétude, d'ennui profond, de langueur déséparante, me rappeler qu'elles ornent mes pensées, ma vie souterraine, qu'elles sont là, à la fois êtres réels et figures littéraires sans lesquelles l'âpreté de l'existence me semble racler peau et chair jusqu'à l'os. (77–78)

The physical reality of some of these women may be questionable; their epithet, "femmes en vert," remains obscure and is open to different readings, but they are an essential part of NDiaye's psychological makeup; they people her thoughts, they circulate in her subconscious; their presence in her life, her interactions with them and their stories are, in part at least, what defines her, what makes her unique, and they

are associated with the various personal tribulations and disquiet that are the source and the substance of her writing. Like the treacherous and threatening Garonne which maintains an inexplicable hold over the *riverains* and prevents them from moving to safer ground, like the strange, black, nameless river-creature that alarms and enthralls the children, the “femmes en vert” hold NDiaye suspended between the desire to stay and the desire to flee, in that uneasy liminal territory of “betwixt and between” which is, it would seem, a fertile ground for the telling of tales:

Je veux quitter cette maison et la femme en vert essaie de me retenir. Elle ne me touche pas, elle parle. D'un autre côté, j'ai le désir de rester encore un peu. Toutes les histoires m'intéressent. (34)

The recurrence in the work of Darrieussecq, NDiaye and Redonnet of liminal places, times, characters and situations is bound up with certain common thematic preoccupations and, in particular, with their constant reprise of questions relating to identity, origin, kinship and displacement. Their characters are constantly finding themselves on thresholds and in interstitial spaces; “neither here nor there,” caught in a “no longer, not yet” time frame, they are pulled in opposite directions towards a past that seems to offer but ultimately fails to provide access to origins and a future that presents the opportunity for creation or renewal of identity, but that remains imprecise and daunting. In all three cases, the prominence of the liminal is explained in large part by the recurrence of the themes of initiation, apprenticeship and passage and by the recourse to various sorts of archetypal narrative structures (for instance, the quest, the picaresque, the fairy tale) which have traditionally provided a framework for the evocation of processes of maturation and transformation and the charting of the psychological, social, moral or spiritual development of the protagonist. Finally, in all three, the attention to the liminal can also be seen as part of a more general preoccupation with ritual that manifests itself in the countless references in their fiction to various sorts of rites, ceremonies and traditions<sup>37</sup> which the characters observe, fail to observe or transgress, the observance, non-observance or transgression providing a clear measure of the integration of a given character within the social group, of the solidity or fragility of kinship and social bonds, and of the power balance between individual and social group.

<sup>37</sup> Rites relating to aggregation and separation, to hospitality and commensality; initiatory ordeals; the transmission of gifts and of knowledge, often from one generation to another.

However, as intimated in the introduction, the analysis of the role of liminal phenomena in Darrieussecq, NDiaye and Redonnet also highlights some of the differences between and distinctive features of their *œuvres*. In all cases, their protagonists are engaged in a search for identity, but the liminal spaces that they occupy are often very different. Thus Darrieussecq's characters are often drawn to places that provide room to take stock, to confront repressed trauma and, if not to find closure, at least to find a way of moving forward. However, at the same time, the personal psychological evolution undergone by her protagonists is viewed against the backdrop of planetary history and processes, the evolution of the species and predictions relating to the technological future, a vast panorama that, even as it relativizes the individual's trauma, locates her evolution within an immense continuum stretching backwards and forwards into the cosmic past and future. The energies of Redonnet's characters are also directed towards the negotiation of the space between past and future, but here the focus is on the tension between, on the one hand, the inexorable processes of decay that constantly threaten to engulf her protagonists and, on the other, their instinctive and unwavering resistance and their determination not only to salvage from the past, but to create anew for the future. The world in which NDiaye's characters find themselves is an even harsher environment than that inhabited by Redonnet's characters and, while in the fiction of the latter the many "helpers" that her protagonists encounter in the course of their quests offer some basis for faith in humanity, NDiaye's perspective on the human race and on its capacity for injury and self-injury appears to be much bleaker. As they anxiously roam around featureless anonymous suburban spaces or the uniform villages and roads of a drab and dreary countryside, many of her protagonists undergo an irremediable process of identity loss in which they are stripped of their rights, possessions, functions and status. Abandoned by kith and kin, duped, spurned or harassed by those they meet, they desperately latch on to impracticable projects which they hope will reinstate them within their community, and they discover that, for them, acceptance within society is conditional upon the surrender of identity.

Finally, the analysis of the motif of liminality also throws into relief both the similarities and the differences in the ways in which Darrieussecq, NDiaye and Redonnet conceive of and present the activity of writing. As we have seen, in all three, writing is associated with the liminal, the ambiguous, the shadowy; it is also a process which is associated with various sorts of ordeal: the trauma of the loss of a sibling

in *Le Pays*, the hardships suffered by the protagonists in Redonnet's trilogy and the disturbing and at times damaging relationships between the narrator of *Autoportrait en vert* and her entourage of "femmes en vert." However, the relationship between these ordeals and the writing process is different in each case. In Darrieussecq's *Le Pays*, the impetus to write seems almost to be an impersonal compulsion that only properly comes into play *after* the protagonist has understood the limits of emotional "sharing" and the unbridgeable separateness that grief induces. For NDiyaé the liminal, sometimes spectral presences of the "femmes en vert" who are associated with times of emotional disturbance in her life are an essential part of what defines her, and her writing has its origins, in part at least, in the disquiet that they introduce into her life. Finally, although offering an indirect account of her own early evolution as a writer,<sup>38</sup> Redonnet's trilogy, through its deployment of allegorical devices and an archaic style that bears some of the hallmarks of orality, suggests a much broader perspective and offers a tentative blueprint for literary renewal that highlights the paradoxical task for the writer who must "build a body of work upon the end of a literature, upon the lost utopia of a generation, upon a society in crisis, and at the same time upon a History that must be reinvented."<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup>Jordan Stump and Marie Redonnet, "Interview," 113.

<sup>39</sup>Redonnet, "The Story of the Triptych," 113.